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In search of place for the trainee teacher: how can geography departments most benefit from welcoming trainee teachers?

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Abstract

The article explores various interpretations of how to position trainee teachers within their geography departments following the narrative of the authors' own professional career from Head of Geography in a school to doctoral researcher at University. Practitioner-led research is discussed as a strategy for school improvement and trainee teacher research is offered as a catalyst for achieving this culture shift. The author draws from his own ongoing research to inform the argument.

Seeking their place in the geography department

All schools want to recruit new teachers but not all contribute their fair share to the training process. This makes it important to be clear about the benefits trainees can bring to a school and how we should position them within the geography department in order to maximise their positive impact ; to find their place (forgive the pun). This article explores some shifting interpretations of the place of the trainee teacher through the narrative of my own career in education and concludes that trainees are a force for school improvement.

From Head of Geography to PGCE tutor

As a Head of Geography (1985-2006) I was often asked if I would take a PGCE student into the department. I usually agreed though not out of any particular enthusiasm for 'passing it forward' or helping the next generation of teachers. In a response typical of many stressed teachers, trainees were low on my list of priorities but had their uses: They produced resources and ideas, provided extra hands in the classroom and as they became more proficient they allowed some release from my own teaching so I could complete other tasks.

But in 2003 I became a part time PGCE Curriculum Tutor and this changed my perspective. My responsibility was now for the trainees not a department. Removed from some of the daily pressures of teaching, allowed the privilege of observing other peoples' classrooms and working in a range of schools instead of just my own, I could focus more clearly on their development. And of course as the trainees' development was my responsibility I began to see training from their point of view rather than the mentors'. Yet I still felt my professional identity to be a teacher. As before I wanted trainees to make themselves useful: embrace their role as full members of their departments, contribute wherever they could in meetings, with curriculum making and extracurricular activities. But now I saw how important it was for their departments to embrace them back and recognise their particular contribution; junior partners rather than apprentices.

Becoming a researcher

The 2008 National Curriculum and the re-professionalization that it called for was a great opportunity for PGCE tutors and their trainees. As a tutor I prioritised the ethos of curriculum making. Trainee teachers had to be part of the process of curriculum making that they would find their placement departments engaging with. More than that, I hoped, with their fresh ideas, enthusiasm and benefit of distance they might be able to make a distinct contribution beyond the capabilities of their departments which might be less keen to tear up and re-write all their Schemes of Work. But what might this contribution be?

In 2008 I also embarked on an Ed D. Curriculum Making and trainee teachers became my research focus. I interviewed a number of mentors and PGCE curriculum tutors about how each of them thought trainees could contribute to their departments. While most of these interviews repeated the utilitarian views of my own experience, I was most struck by the response of one colleague who believed that the most significant contribution of trainee teacher was that they introduced a culture of reflectivity to a department. As they observe and are observed, they generate evaluative reflection among colleagues as well as for themselves and through this they help to reinvigorate self critical practice among teachers. As well as evaluating lessons, trainees are expected to conduct various research tasks during their placements and it struck me how 'research' is just a few methodological steps away from routine evaluation and reflection. And so my focus shifted onto the concept of practitioner-led research; teachers researching their own classrooms which they know better than anybody to solve problems they have identified themselves to find solutions which help them do their own job better.

Research and teacher-as-researcher

How we define and qualify 'educational research' and what it is for is a weighty debate in its own right, but could be reduced on one hand to professional enquiry commissioned by management to generate objective data to inform their decisions, conducted by outsider research professionals; and on the other hand, practitioner research conducted by teachers themselves to meet their own agendas. The latter model of the Teacher as Researcher can linked to the philosophy of John Dewey in the early 20th century whose educational model positioned teachers as co-investigators with children in the classroom.

Since then the Teacher as Researcher model has come in and out of the limelight. Lawrence Stenhouse, co-ordinator of the School's Council Humanities Projects in the 1970s, warmly encouraged participants in his projects and teachers at large to engage in researching their own classrooms and the central plank for professional development (Stenhouse 1976, 1980). Others have subsequently argued that the Teacher as Researcher should constitute the principle and most effective means for driving school improvement (Elliott 2000, Rudduck 1991, Wiliam 2011, Fullan 2003). While the reliability and validity of small scale, amateur teacher-research projects may be questioned, a recognised methodological literature on Action Research has emerged to give it credibility apart from which advocates would argue that they are more interested in the process of teacher engagement and its impacts on practice rather than end result data. The point is that by engaging in researching their own classroom teachers become more reflective and as a result rejuvenate and improve their own practice.

But how to engage teachers in their own classroom research? Could it be that the presence of trainee teachers conducting their PGCE investigations might act as a catalyst for this? The Sussex PGCE course requires trainees to conduct a classroom-based 'Special Study' research project which they write up as a 6,000 word assessment. They are urged to focus on an issue that their geography department would like to see developed as well as being of personal interest to the trainee. I decided to investigate whether the PGCE 'Special Study' process might have an impact on attitudes of geography departments and the wider school. Could this be the most significant contribution, the place of trainees?

Methodology

I decided to focus on three geography trainees in three different schools from March to May 2011. I would interview them, their mentors and their professional tutors each at the beginning of the Special Study process, in the middle and then after it had been completed. At each of these 27 interviews I planned to ask what involvement each person had had in the trainees' Special Studies, what effect they thought it was having on the department but also what their views were about the more general theme of teacher-led classroom research. I hoped to monitor if these attitudes changed over time, as the trainees' research process progressed.

The schools involved could be located at different points along a continuum of attitude towards teacher-research culture. School U had a well-established culture of involving all teachers in school wide research projects. Here trainee J's study was to explore 'the place of locational knowledge in the geography curriculum'. He was concerned about the apparent poverty of locational detail in school geography course, as was the department. In contrast School H had a complete lack of teacher-researcher culture. Here, INSET and CPD were centrally directed and cascaded from the top-down. Here trainee L had been asked to find out 'what geography do pupils want to learn at KS3?' with a view to informing the re-writing of the KS3 curriculum and improving the popularity of geography in the option choices. Thirdly, school M sat somewhat in-between these. Teacher research was seen as a good idea, but no one was doing any; 'if only there was time'. Here, trainee T wanted to explore 'the use of poster displays as a vehicle for classroom activity.' This had also evolved from a departmental desire to enhance the popularity of geography and increased recruitment in options.

Early indications from the research

Early reading of these interview transcripts lead to some interesting thoughts. In school U which was already committed to teacher-research, the trainee's research had no novelty and little impact. The topic chosen -development of pupils' locational knowledge- had previously been prioritised by the department. While J hoped to further embed this through his teaching and research, the mentor and PT did not become closely involved in the Study, having their own research preoccupations.

In contrast, in school H where research culture was absent, student L's study on 'what geography do pupils want to learn at KS3' was used directly to inform the current revision of the KS3 Programme of Study. By delivering a report it allowed the busy department some perspective which they had hitherto been unable to find. Trainee L was pleased that through the study she had been able to raise the profile of pupil voice and 'learning' while all commented on the currency that 'research' provides for ideas which might otherwise be taken less seriously. This Study made a big impression

on the professional identity and ethos of trainee L while leading to concrete changes in the Geography department's Programme of Study. However it did nothing to enhance a teacher-researcher culture in the school.

Finally trainee T's study on 'the use of poster displays as a vehicle for classroom activity' seemed to have a significant impact on trainee, department and professional tutor in the 'if only there was time' school M. Engagement in the project opened new dimensions for the trainee who had always shied away from the creative but now became enthused by the possibilities of wall displays. As his classroom displays developed other teachers became interested and self-critical about their own use of classroom space leading to widespread discussion about practice in several departments. The geography department in particular saw the development of displays as a means of identifying its own area within the building, promoting its identity and enhancing recruitment at KS4. As research was implicitly recognised as a good thing 'if only there were time', teachers mentor and professional tutor were all supportive of my own research interviews as well as trainee T. Here more than elsewhere my interviews caused reflection and the possibility of a culture shift. T's Study was a catalyst for reflection and changing practice; the beginnings of the development of a wider teacher-researcher culture towards school improvement.

As a PGCE tutor and Ed D researcher my own actions may have contributed to change. The special attention given to T, L and J increased their confidence and our conversations seem to have embedded the teacher-researcher dimension in their professionalism. My research gaze has heightened their own self-criticality.

But more significantly I believe my engagement with Professional Tutors led them to question their own personal and institutional research culture. I engaged them in discussion about the meaning of research, its value, and possible ways of organising it and whether or how schools should engage their staff in the process. No doubt my status as a University tutor and Ed D researcher provided privilege not only in gaining interview access but also perhaps in providing credibility and authority for the teacher-as-researcher ethos underlying my questioning. Nevertheless this experience showed how the researcher himself can catalyse change by simply asking the question.

Teaching and learning communities

Since 2006 I have been the Partnership Co-ordinator for Sussex School of Education and in this capacity have regularly visited all our partner schools to check on the progress and quality of training. Over these five years I have become increasingly interested in discussing how schools organise their staff CPD, how this interfaces with their school improvement strategy and how Initial Teacher Education is related to this. I have been keen to promote the Teaching & Learning Community model for CPD and INSET during these visits and I took the opportunity of my research interviews to raise this again.

Teaching & Learning Communities (TLC) draw on Stenhouse's vision of all teacher-as-researchers (1976, 1980). All staff are allocated to one of a series of TLC s. Each TLC adopts a school improvement priority and the TLC s then meets to discuss how this can be explored, developed and improved in their own respective departments. Teachers plan their own micro research plans to further this focus and then go off to try things out and reflect. School meeting time is provided to facilitate this process, whether from the meeting cycle, CPD programme or in some cases INSET days

where some schools have brought everyone together at the end of the year to share the conclusions of each TLC.

These TLCs can offer a well-tuned vehicle for disseminating school improvement priorities to all staff and encouraging them to take ownership through implantation and monitoring in their own classrooms. This is likely to be far more effective than top-down INSET provision which can be viewed by teachers as a distraction or waste of time and always suffers from a low level of follow up application in teachers' classrooms.

The TLC model has been staging a re-appearance in many of our partnership schools, including school U. Their growing adoptions across our partnership indicate a realisation of its benefits for school improvement and continuing professional development of teachers. It also shows that these head-teachers have encouraged the TLC culture by allowing staff some –if not enough- time to do it. Of course this also validates teacher research, gives it authority within the institution and sets it as an achievable professional expectation.

Trainee teachers and TLCs?

Where trainee teachers are in TLC schools they are expected to participate and their impact may, like trainee J, be a little lost in the dynamic culture. They may have little individual impact however the experience of such a placement is likely to embed the teacher-as-researcher culture in their professional development.

In contrast, in schools like M and H without TLCs the research active trainee may have a more significant individual impact as was the case for trainees L and T. But the research ethos is less likely to become a significant part of their professional identity since no other teachers are research active; although trainee T and L do seem to have internalised the ethos as a result perhaps of the special attention afforded by my research.

Paradoxically this may suggest that while trainees can have a short term impact in spreading teacher-as-researcher culture where it is absent, any longer term entrenchment of TLCs might recue the distinctive contribution of trainees. But perhaps this would be a good if trainee and teacher cultures converge.

The Coalition government drive for school-based models for Initial Teacher Education could provide an opportunity for significantly disseminating the TLC and teacher-as-research model. If University PGCE tutors based themselves in partner schools, running sequences of curriculum sessions in them, working in their subject department and classrooms, they would also be ideally placed to support other members of the staff with research methods advice and supervision. This would offer schools a fantastic support facility as they develop their TLCs and of course University supervision would enable individuals to seek academic validation for their projects through flexible Master Degree programmes. Trainee teachers could find themselves at the heart of school improvement and professional development, a pretty central place.

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